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Selective Welcome: How Race Shaped Immigration Policy in the U.S. and Europe

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"The recently unveiled National Windrush Monument at Waterloo station, London". Photo by The wub

Key Ideas

• **U.S. and European immigration policies have been shaped by racial and ethnic categorization.** After the U.S Civil War and World Wars I & II, Global North governments increasingly targeted groups they considered racially or culturally undesirable.

• **In the early 20th century, U.S. immigration policies were influenced by eugenics—the belief that some races were biologically superior.** These ideas led to policies which favoured Northern and Western Europeans while limiting immigrants from Southern Europe, Africa, and Asia from migrating into the U.S.

• **After World War II, European countries recruited migrants from former colonies to rebuild their economies.** Initially welcomed as labourers, these migrants often faced discrimination and remained socially isolated, reinforcing racial boundaries.

Recommendations

• Governments should eliminate nationality-based quotas and reassess temporary labour recruitment programs to ensure they do not disadvantage migrants from formerly colonized countries.

• They should adjust their current immigration policies to address racial discrimination in entry, settlement, and citizenship processes.

• Governments should develop programs that safeguard migrants' rights and combat racial discrimination in immigration processes.

In both the U.S. and Europe, immigration policies didn't openly declare racial intentions but were deeply influenced by fears of demographic change and maintaining a predominantly white population.

Immigration is one of the most globally salient issues. As governments debate who can migrate, it is also important to reflect on how those determinations have historically been made. CMS affiliate and UBC professor of Political Science, Terri Givens, examines how racial fears drove much of the Global North's immigration policies. In doing so, she demonstrates how immigration policies are not just about borders but also about the ethnically and racially selective nature of belonging.

In her book[1], Givens identifies several periods when immigration policy was particularly determined along racial boundaries. In the decades following the U.S. Civil War, several laws actively restricted migration from Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe to preserve a white, Protestant national identity. Similarly, in post–World War II Europe, countries like the UK, France, and Germany recruited workers from former colonies to rebuild their economies, later restricting their mobility after reconstruction.

Taken together, these policies show how immigration systems were shaped not only by labour demands or security concerns but also by racial logics. Givens' analysis shows how these historical hierarchies continue to structure current debates on immigration, shaping unequal access to mobility and belonging.

Key Findings

Slavery, Colonialism, and Immigration

Choices about immigration policy—who to let in—cannot be separated from racial politics and the legacy of slavery. For instance, after the U.S. Civil War, southern states began to build systems that maintained racial hierarchies, especially to preserve access to cheap Black labour. Similarly, Americans moving westward into states like California brought with them racial attitudes reinforced by the south. Both Southern Democrats and Western Republicans worked together to create immigration laws protecting a white, Protestant vision of America, including explicitly exclusionary policies, like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882[2]—which banned Chinese labourers from entering the United States.

European nations, for their part, built racial hierarchies through colonialism. After World War II, countries like the United Kingdom needed workers to rebuild their economies. To do so, they recruited labourers from former colonies, like the Caribbean and South Asia. While initially allowed to move freely to the UK, in 1962 the UK passed the Commonwealth Immigrants Act[3] which ended the right of Commonwealth citizens to live in the UK. This bill and others limited access to mobility for non-white Commonwealth country citizens. In both the U.S. and Europe, politicians across the political spectrum developed immigration policies deeply influenced by longstanding systems of slavery, colonialism and racialized logics.

Racial Hierarchies & U.S. Immigration

In the early 20th century, ideas of white racial superiority were popular in the U.S. Frequently referred to as eugenics, this was a belief that some races were biologically better than others. Immigrants to the U.S. from Southern and Eastern Europe were seen as racially inferior to Northern and Western Europeans. Racially based ideas on migration were even formally investigated by the 1907-1911 Dillingham Commission, a government body that gathered data on immigrants' backgrounds and living conditions. The commission's conclusions reaffirmed these ideas, arguing that immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were less desirable.

This report provided justification for new immigration restrictions, including screening measures like literacy tests and a head tax on immigrants from less developed countries. In 1921 and 1924, the U.S. then passed the Immigration Act and the Johnson-Reed Act[4] respectively, both of which set quotas overwhelmingly favouring Northern and Western Europeans. In doing so, racial hierarchies were reinforced in the U.S., limiting immigrants from Africa and Asia from migrating into the U.S.

Isolated Migrant Communities in Europe

European countries like the UK, France, and Germany initially welcomed migrants as labourers from former colonies to help rebuild their economies after World War II. However, workers predominantly from the Caribbean and South Asia in the UK frequently faced hostility and were viewed as not truly belonging, despite their legal rights as Commonwealth citizens. In France, the government responded to North and Sub-Saharan Africa migrants facing racial discrimination by claiming everyone is treated equally regardless of their racial and ethnic identity—a so-called colour-blind approach.

In short, European governments' both ignored the discrimination and sometimes even perpetuated immigrants' isolation. These immigrants recruited to fill labour shortages in Europe, often ended up living in group housing and working low-paying jobs, creating areas marked by poverty and social tension. Though many stayed and formed long-term communities, they nonetheless faced long-term discrimination and remained socially isolated, reinforcing racial boundaries.

Methods

These finding are based on Dr. Terri Givens' book *The Roots of Racism: The Politics of White Supremacy in the US and Europe*. In her book, Givens uses a process tracing method to analyse key policy changes over time. Through a historical institutionalism methodology, she examines how immigration policies have shaped racial hierarchies over time.

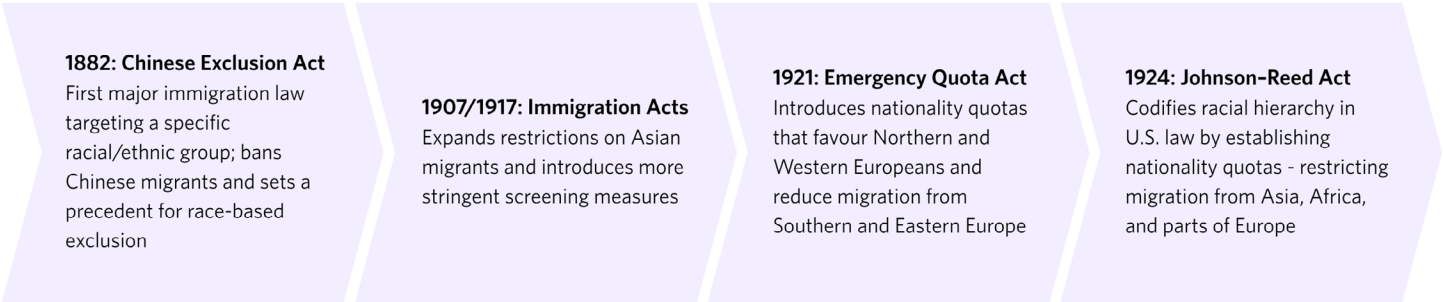

Figure 1. Key milestones in the racialization of U.S. immigration policy. (Source: Givens, 2025)

Conclusion

Through an analysis of U.S. and European immigration policies from the 1880s through the 1970s, Terri Givens shows how these nations developed their immigration practices through a lens of racially-based ideas and hierarchies. Despite governments regularly crafting laws that appeared neutral in text, in practice, the have actively excluded racial and ethnic minorities. Today, explicit racial quotas are no longer used, but the legacy of these policies still shapes immigration debates and practices. Discourses around border control, asylum seekers, and immigrant integration are often framed around racial and cultural anxieties. Understanding this history is a crucial first step toward subsequently developing just and equitable migration policies. Any attempts to build fairer immigration systems, must take seriously policies of inclusion and equal rights.

References

1 Givens, Terri E. *The Roots of Racism: The Politics of White Supremacy in the US and Europe*. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022.

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3 United Kingdom. *Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962*, c. 21. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962. Accessed May 15, 2025.

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Terri Givens is a Professor of Political Science at the University of British Columbia and a CMS affiliate. With a distinguished career that includes leadership roles as Vice Provost at the University of Texas at Austin and Provost of Menlo College, she has made significant contributions to higher education and scholarship. Dr. Givens is the author of several influential books, including *Radical Empathy: Finding a Path to Bridging Racial Divides* and *The Roots of Racism: The Politics of White Supremacy in the US and Europe*.

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